[Begging]

January 31, 1939.

Carl T. Garrison (white) H. R. Hensley (white)

72 Burton Street,

West Asheville, N. C.

WPA worker

Farmer

Anne Winn Stevens, writer

Douglas Carter, reviser [E. Bj.?]

BEGGING REDUCED TO A SYSTEM

Four Garrett children, the oldest a girl of fifteen, huddled at the door of the principal's office in the public school. When asked why they had been absent from school for five weeks, the children could give no intelligible answer. The idea uppermost in their minds was that their mother had told them to ask for free lunches. They were scantily clad for a November day. Their clothes were clean, but they seemed to have on little underclothing and to [possess?] neither coats nor sweaters. Their shoes were full of holes. The group was obviously under-nourished, thin, pasty of complexion, anemic. One of the teachers describing them said, “They look just like poor little rats.”

The principal reached for the telephone. He called the State Aid worker assigned to the school. “Mrs. Holt, look up the Garrett children; you know the address,” he said. “Find out

why they have been absent from school for five weeks, and why they wish to be put on the free lunch list. They are always asking for something."

A few minutes later the worker parked her car near a large, yellow house on a sparsely settled street inhabited mostly by negroes. C9 — N.C: Box 1.

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After a few minutes, Mrs. Garrett came out and stood with her visitor on the windy porch. She was a thin woman, about thirty-three years old, with a pasty complexion, and projecting teeth. Her hair was much too yellow - drug store gold. Although the morning was raw and cold she wore a thin, sleeveless summer dress and no wrap.

"Yes, I live here," she said, hugging herself to keep warm; "me and my husband and our six children live in three rooms, upstairs."

The Henson's, who are her parents, and their youngest daughter and orphaned grandchildren occupy the lower floor.

She explained the children's absences. No, they had had measles long ago; it was the children under school age who had it now. "My husband had been out of work for nine weeks," she declared. "When we was asked to leave the cabin whar we wuz livin;" pointing to a tiny, log house in a hollow across the street, "we tuk the children and went to my brother's at Emma looking for work." That was five weeks ago.

"No'm, we didn't find no work. But my husband and me tuk in washin'. He'd go out and get the clothes, and help me do 3 them. Then he got back on WPA and we come back to Asheville." She explained that her husband had been on the WPA for some time. The project on which he was working "run out," as she put it. So he had been suspended until work could be found for him elsewhere.

“He has always been a hard worker,” she maintained. He had worked in the mills. He had been a clerk in a grocery store at $12 a week. He had been a truck driver for the city, and for various transfer companies. Before the depression, he had made $20 a week.

“We lived real well the,” she said. “But there wasn't as many of us.”

But for the past few years he had worked mainly as an unskilled laborer on the WPA.

“He goes back to work tomorrow,” she said. “After he gets his first pay cheek, we can get along. But we haven't had anything in the house to eat for a week now but two messes of flour and a peck of meal. The children has nothin' for breakfast but a biscuit or a slice of corn bread. They come home after school begging for food. But I can't give them but two meals a day. That's why I want to get free lunches.”

So the family was given commodities by the welfare department; beans, flour, and dried milk. The school agreed to give them lunches, and a member of the parent-teacher association offered to find clothes and shoes for them.

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Several weeks later, Mrs. Garrett, head tied up in a white cloth, was found trying to divert a fretful two-year-old. The room was clean, but rather bare, with shabby linoleum on the floor. The bed was without sheets or pillow cases. But the mattress was covered by an unbleached cover-slip. The blankets were clean, but mostly cotton.

“That's my baby,” she said, indicating the two-year-old. “He shore has had a hard time.” She enumerated the illnesses of his two short years: diptheria, pneumonia, measles, and now an abscess in his ear. He had a bad cold also, and a sore on his upper lip, which his mother wiped every now and then with a not-too-clean cotton cloth. Like the other children, he had too waxen a look.

Library of Congress

“The doctor says as how he should have orange juice every day, and tomatoes and onions mashed with potatoes, but I don't have no money to buy them things for him. I ain't nothing to give him but cereal.” However, she admitted some one was sending him milk every day. But she didn't know who.

She was still feeding the older children on biscuits, corn bread, and now “white beans,” but not bread and beans at the same meal. Christmas had been a great help to the family. “Nine dollars a week for eight people,” she maintained nevertheless, “doesn't go far, after rent and coal has been paid for.”

But they had “gotten” a bag of coal from a dealer, whose trucks her husband loaded on his way from work. Still, “It was mostly dust,” she complained. “When it was poured into 5 the stove it flew all over the room, until we was all sneezing.”

The Christmas basket from a civic organization had helped. But again she said , “How long could five dollars [?] worth of groceries last for eight people?”

However, she had profited by various Christmas charities.

“I stood in line before Pender's [?] [shoe?] store two or three hours Christmas morning. You know he allus gives away shoes on Christmas. I got three good pair for the children. And I got two of the boys into the dinner given by the Y.M.C.A. While I was waiting for then I went by the doctor's office and asked the nurse for a sample bottle of cod-liver oil for the baby. She give me three bottles of it,” she narrated.

It is easy to see where the Garrett children get their habit of always asking for something. As far as charitable organizations are concerned, their mother knows all the answers.

She enumerated her further needs. “You know,” she said plaintively, “I ain't got but one sheet, no pillow cases, and only one towel, and I asked the Red Cross, and the welfare

department both, for some. It looks like someone might give me a few towels; they are so cheap!”

Finally she admitted that she was seven months advanced in pregnancy, and as yet had no layette. “The Red Cross,” she declared, “used to give lovely ones, all put up in a nice basket. But, “ in an aggrieved tone, “they told me as how they didn't have any more .”

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But Mrs. Garrett, who says she completed only the third grade in school, and never learned “to figger,” has found a neighbor who is quite sympathetic. “Mrs. Garrett, my husband has a good steady job,” said the neighbor, “I guess I'm just plumb lucky; so I'll find you some of my baby's things that he don't need, or has outgrowed.”

However, there is a shoemaker in the neighborhood who is wondering: “Where do you suppose Garrett got those six new shirts he sold me last week?” Can it be that the Garretts are making money off charitable organizations, o or off sympathetic individuals?

When Mr. Garrett came in, he was asked about his WPA job, his wages, and his situation in general.

“I used to be a foreman, but now I'm just doing common labor, getting a little over $18 every pay period; whenever the weather is good enough to put in full time. Weather like this - we'll lose some time this month. That ain't much for eight people to live on, is it? A little over $9 a week. They used to give us Government food, but they won't give us anything now. One fellow down there is the cause of it all. When they get it in for you, there ain't nothing you can do. Who'd you say you was with?”

“The Federal Writers' Project.”

“Well, the WPA and the welfare department ought to be cleaned up. You can't get a thing now. My wife is going to have another baby soon, and I can't get any clothes for it, or

anything. They won't do a thing. They've just got it in for 7 me, that's all. Why right over on the next street is a WPA foreman who gets Government food every week - and clothes - and he only has four children. They won't give me a thing. That boy there, now, has got a sore throat, and I can't get a thing for him."

"Don't the children get medical attention from the city authorities, or the county?"

"No, They won't do nothing for anybody that ain't on relief. I have to just get whatever doctor I can."

"How is the house rented?"

"I rent the house for $15 a month, and the people down stairs pay $7.50 for their half."

"Do they pay regularly?"

"Yes; but they are going to move out next week, and I reckon we'll have to move, too - then. The Wood Reality Company has got this house, and they're awful strict."

"Couldn't you rent the downstairs part to someone else?"

"Naw."

But Mrs. Garrett, in the kitchen, at the same moment said, "Sure; there's somebody by here almost every day wants to rent a place." Mr. Garrett ignored this.

"They's only one bathroom in this house, and it's up here. I don't want strangers running in and out of my bathroom. They ain't no locks on none of the doors, either."

Indeed, there are neither locks nor knobs, but each door has a string by which it is pulled open, or shut. However, the radio, which was turned off to facilitate the conversation.

is the very latest in design, and quite new. It came from one of the large mail-order houses that now maintain retail stores in principal cities, and it has the automatic features characteristic of the modern sets. The furniture, too, is of recent design, and not very old, but there is not much of it. Chairs are scarce, and there is no rug on the floor.

“Is your furniture paid for?”

“No, it ain't. They'll be taking that back, next.”

“What will you do then?”

“Well, I don't know. Maybe I can get some more, somewhere.”

“On credit?”

“Sure. I can't pay for no furniture.”

“Do you buy other things on credit, too - that radio, for example?”

“Of course, I had to make a down payment on that, same as furniture, but you can't hadly hardly get no credit anywhere else.”

It was apparent from further conversation that he must have sought credit everywhere, practically, and, failing to obtain credit, asked for gifts, although he would not acknowledge this. All efforts to draw him out further were in / vain. He would not admit receiving gifts, money, or help from private individuals or organizations. He always returned to the complaint that the public agencies seemed to have it in for him, would not give him anything, would not help him; while others, already more fortunate, were getting free food, clothes, 9 medicine, etc. He said it was not easy, on his wages, to keep the electric power turned on, but they had oil lamps to use whenever the power was off. However, he missed the radio during those times.

On the first floor of the same house live the Hensons, Mrs. Garrett's parents. Mr. Henson, who has lived in town for the last ten years, was formerly a farmer. He used to own his own farm. He is now sixty-six years old, and is unable to work because of a very serious heart trouble. He maintains that any man can make a living on a farm and work only one-eight of his time. His own experience of farming was to him altogether satisfactory. He planted a diversified crop. Kept cows, chickens, hogs. He had plenty to eat for his family, and the surplus clothed them. Besides, when work on the farm was slack he did carpentering. It was illness he declares that had put him in need. His wife has been an invalid for fifteen years, and has had numerous operations.

The Henson apartment is neatly kept. The Living room has a bright, red and tan linoleum on the floor. The white and red flowered curtains are crisp and clean. The walls are filled with pictures of the family, hung just under the ceiling, which perhaps is just as well, where they form a sort of frieze. The bedroom is cheerful, if rather bare. The two faded-green iron beds are covered with red and white counterpanes. There are no rugs. The room is heated with a 10 small stove. Mrs. Henson, the invalid, is a pleasant looking brown-eyed, brown-haired woman of fifty-six. Her expression is patient, and resigned. Her voice is soft. Dressed in a red and white wrapper, she was seated on the side of the bed.

“I was married at sixteen,” she said. “It was too young. I've been married to Henson forty year. He was the first and only boy I ever went with.” Mrs. Henson attributed her invalidism to much child bearing. She has had nine children. Besides successive operations, she has developed sinus trouble, [?] colitis, and gall stones.

“If I was just well enough, I could make a good living sewing,” she says.

“All I ever had,” said Henson, “has gone to support doctors, hospitals, and druggists.”

On first coming to town, Mr. Henson supported his family by carpenter work and brick laying, until his heart trouble became so serious he had to stop working. He has had, also,

a sinus operation. However, he still does a little farming. A friend down the river lends him a few acres of land, where he raises some corn, potatoes, and vegetables.

The Henson's eighteen-year-old daughter, Grace, keeps house for them. They have with them two orphan grandchildren. The county allows then $20 a month for these children's support. Out of that, they pay $7.50 a month for rent, and $12 a month for coal.

“I guess,” says Mr. Henson, “We'll just have to get along without eating.

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Mr. Henson has his own ideas of how the Government should be run.

“If the Government would only put a lot of these people on relief back on the land,” he says, “and have them raise food for themselves and for others not able to work, they might get somewhere. Of course, the Government would have to carry them at first. But once they got a start, they could support themselves.”

“We are just paupers, I guess,” summed up Mr. Henson; “just poor, white trash.”

“Poor,” said his wife, “but not trash!”